

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 801

CE 057 042

AUTHOR Frantz, Nevin R., Jr.
TITLE Practice Oriented Research or Research Oriented Practice.
PUB DATE 30 Nov 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention (Cincinnati, OH, November 30, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Economic Factors; *Information Dissemination; Linking Agents; Networks; Organizational Effectiveness; Participative Decision Making; Policy Formation; Political Influences; *Research and Development; *Research Utilization; School Districts; Socioeconomic Influences; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

How can research and practice can be linked together to improve vocational education? Vocational education researchers should conduct research that can directly benefit policy makers and practitioners and present their findings in ways that influence the improvement of policy and practice. Three basic assumptions need to be recognized: (1) the political, sociological, economic, context of a given state, a nation, and the world is a major determination of issues addressed by federal and state policy makers and affects practitioners at local school division levels; (2) research can influence, enlighten, and sensitize policy makers and better inform implementation, application, and practice; and (3) the need for and development and dissemination of new knowledge is a complex process and the way the information is obtained, developed, and transmitted is as important as the knowledge itself. There is a concern for strategies that link researchers with practitioners and from universities to provide incentives for application-based research. Priority should be given to research that will directly benefit policy makers and practitioners, and their findings should be presented in ways that will communicate effectively to the users of that research. This will require collaborative partnerships in improving the policy and practice of vocational education. (NLA)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED328801

PRACTICE ORIENTED RESEARCH
OR
RESEARCH ORIENTED PRACTICE

By

Nevin R. Frantz, Jr.
Director
Division of Vocational and Technical Education
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

A Presentation Made At A Symposium

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

NR Frantz Jr.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Held During The
American Vocational Association Convention
Cincinnati, Ohio
November 30, 1990

CE 057042

Practice Oriented Research
Or
Research Oriented Practice

Nevin R. Frantz, Jr.

Is research influenced by practice or is practice driven by research? If we look at the physical sciences, one might also ask does theory translate into practice or do the applied sciences develop new theories? Does science drive technology or does science grow out of a technological discovery? Does hereditary influence human behavior or is the environment the primary determinant of human behavior? As you examine these questions you can find evidence that supports either side of the equation. The theory of Copernicus postulated the sun as the center of a universe around which celestial bodies rotated was confirmed by Kepler and is applied today by thousands of scientists and engineers in the exploration of space. However, the theory of natural selection as stated by Darwin in his Origin of the Species was developed over a twenty year time period from observations of existing natural phenomena. The evidence turned a hunch into a theory of evolution.

In science, the experiments of Gregor Mendel that were conducted at an Austrian monastery formed the theory that began the science of genetics and the applied science of today's genetic engineering. On the other hand, the invention of the telescope by Lewenhock was a technological discovery that led to the development of a science called astronomy. Heredity does explain the genetic carrier of diseases such as sickle cell anemia or schizophrenia but factors in the environment will better explain the high incidence of

cancer for homeowners near the Love Canal or individuals suffering from depression.

When one examines the dichotomous question of should practice influence research or should research influence practice a dilemma exists again for the community of professionals in education and vocational education. One can look at the learning theory of behaviorism and illustrate the application in the programmed instruction movement in the 1960's with the continuing vestiges of theory into practice as observed by behavioral objectives and competency based instruction being the integral component of delivering vocational and technical education throughout the country. On the other hand, the integration of basic skills into vocational education grew out of concern on the part of practitioners, employers from business and industry who want employees that can function effectively in a more demanding workplace.

One could debate the relative merit of either premise that I was invited to address and cite evidence to support either side of the equation. This appears to me to be a fruitless, barren, non-productive behavior to engage in and I would like to shift the focus of my remarks in the time remaining to address what I believe is the basic fundamental issue at state. That is: How can research and practice be linked together to better inform the enterprise of vocational education? The answer to that question, in my opinion, is that the most important task of researchers in vocational education is to improve the effectiveness of the enterprise by conducting research that: (1) can directly benefit policy makers and practitioners and (2) present their findings in ways that will influence the improvement of vocational education policy and practice.

Assumptions

There are at least three basic assumptions that need to be recognized in the quest for better collaboration between research and the improvement and practice of vocational education.

1. The political, sociological, economic, context of a given state, the nation, as well as, and the world is a major determinant of issues that will be addressed by policy makers of vocational education at federal and state levels and affect vocational education practitioners at local school division levels.

Any need for change grows out of a collective desire on the part of individuals to modify and improve the existing state of affairs. These needs are imbedded in the values that people hold about the present condition of any state of affairs. If vocational education research is to have any impact on making needed changes and improving the existing enterprise then we need to move beyond the usual surveys of existing phenomenon, the conduct of input/output studies and cost benefit analyses. As Jeannie Oakes points out in her critique of vocational education research these types of studies "provide little of the information that is required either to explain what is happening, good or bad, or to point to directions for improvement. What is required for understanding and improvement, according to Oakes, is contextual information, information about those elements that contribute to the environment of the classroom, school and community state, and nation in which vocational education programs take place. She advocates a critical inquiry approach into the context of vocational education to shed light on

issues and problems and examine the values and beliefs on which policies and practices are based.

An interesting paradigm classifying kinds of research and their influence on policy and practice was presented by Bulmer in his work on The Uses of Social Research. In this paradigm, Bulmer proposes an enlightened model of research that sees "research as 'interaction' which focuses primarily upon the political and social context in which research is used. Those engaged in developing policy communicate with many different sources of information, advice, and pressure--administrators, politicians, practitioners, planners, journalists, clients, interest groups, and social scientists, among others. All these participants are pooling their efforts and knowledge in an attempt to tackle a particular problem. They engage in mutual consultations and discussion, or produce evidence relative to the policy in question." The model also assumes that the pattern of influence by research results is a diffuse one and the process from research to decision but is one part of a complicated process that is a disorderly set of interconnections that uses experience, political know how, communication technologies, pressure, and judgement to arrive at policy decisions.

2. Research can influence, enlighten, sensitize, policy makers and better inform the implementation, application, and practice of vocational education.

The corollary is also true. Practitioners and policy makers can also influence the kind of research that is needed, defining problems to be

addressed, feasibility of its use, and the strategies to communicate the results that optimizes the maximum impact of the research on policy and practice. According to Lorraine McDonnell of the Rand Corporation, research based information can most effectively serve three main functions, these are: (1) providing a general framework of thinking about a problem, (2) defining the problem and identifying solutions, and (3) analyzing the feasibility of various options. If all three of these functions are to be met, it requires a partnership between those who know the educational effects (researchers) of different policy/practice alternatives and those who understand (practitioners) their political, organizational, and economic effects. She advocates stronger links between education research and policy/practice and suggests that education researchers take a different stance than they have traditionally held. "Success in policy/practice decision making will require partnerships between those who study education as student learning as those who study it as public policy and between those who are researchers and those willing to serve as research brokers. It will also require that researchers anticipate the future information needs of policy makers and practitioners."

3. The need for, development of, and dissemination of new knowledge is a complex process and the way in which the need for information is obtained, developed, and transmitted is often as important as the substance of the knowledge itself.

Research results and the information it produces does not progress

in a linear fashion into applications of policy and practice. It is a well documented fact that policy makers as well as practitioners turn to readily available, highly visible, reliable sources for their information. Most often these are national and state professional organizations such as the NEA, AVA and their state affiliates. In fact one of the major purposes of these organizations is to translate and disseminate relevant research into information that is useful to practitioners and policy makers through conferences, legislative hearings, and publications. The linkages and networks are in place at state and national levels for the utilization of research in making public policy and better informing practitioners.

Much of the research in vocational education in this nation is accomplished at land grant universities by faculty and their graduate students. Additional research on vocational education is conducted through the National Center for Research on Vocational Education as well as other state and federal contracts with various research organizations. However much of the research conducted by these groups is not always well known nor utilized by the organizations in better informing policy makers and practitioners. If researchers wish to link with policy and practice it is critical that they tap into existing networks, organizations, and information channels. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the reward structures and graduate preparation programs of most land grant universities which places emphasis

on the dissemination of research primarily in referred scholarly publications. It is important that this occurs, if for no other reason than for serving as a copyright for the research results. However perhaps we need to revise incentives for faculty recognition and reward for research and scholarship and ask questions such as, How did you determine the research problem?, How was the research utilized?, What difference or impact did it make?, and require some documentation of evidence that the research was serving some useful purpose. Vocational education research will be useful to the extent that researchers are committed to examining relevant problems, translating their findings into language that is helpful in, communicating with the real world of policy makers and practitioners and working with organizations or groups to implement their findings.

Concerns and Suggestions

1. Concern: Need to consider strategies to link researchers with practitioners in identifying problems and issues for the conduct of research in vocational education.

Suggestion: The National Center for Research in Vocational Education in cooperation with AVERA and the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education hold a forum each year at AVA where individuals, organizations, and agencies are invited to present issues and problems of concern that need to be addressed through research in vocational education. The results of this forum could then be used by the NCRVE Advisory Board

in establishing research priorities for research by the Center.

2. Concern: Need a collaborative interactive approach to the conduct and dissemination of research for vocational education in order to better influence the formation of policy and conduct of practice.

Suggestions: 1. Provide incentives by establishing criteria that requires interdisciplinary teams composed of researchers practitioners for funding research projects in the NCRVE or through USDOE discretionary funds or by having a portion of such research funds set aside to conduct research on problems and practices that could be best addressed through a partnership approach.

2. Require that all research projects using federal funds be disseminated through formats and strategies, other than the printed word, that utilize collaborative efforts with existing professional organizations in planning and delivering inservice, technical assistance models that effectively communicate research results to policy makers and practitioners.

3. Concern: Universities need to provide incentives for the preparation of faculty and graduate students that values the application of research to policy and practice.

Suggestion: 1. Provide faculty with rewards that recognizes the importance of being researchers and research brokers.

2. Develop, perhaps using the hopefully forthcoming GLD programs in the new Perkins Act, a new approach to leadership where students are given the opportunity to conduct research in a collaborative setting, involving

practitioners or policy makers, that would be used in improving some problem or practice at the national level or in a given state or local school division.

In conclusion priority should be given to research that will directly benefit policy makers and practitioners of vocational education and that their findings be presented in ways that will communicate effectively to the users of that research. In this process it is important to remember that changes in policy and practice are driven by environmental factors and critical inquiry into the context of vocational education may determine how best to utilize the research for improvement of policy and practice. This will require collaborative partnerships between those who understand how it should be utilized in improving the policy and practice of vocational education.

References

- Bulmer, M. (1982) The uses of social research. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- McDonnell, L. M. () Can education research speak to state policy. Theory Into Practice, 27(2), 91-97.
- Oakes, J. (1986). Beneath the bottom line: A critique of vocational education research. Journal of Vocational Education Research, 11(2), 33-50.